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KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS AND "THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST" TALE

THE THEORY that dream and myth are intimately related, referred to by Freud and elaborated by Jung and associated psychologists, is supported by the curious reappearance in Kafka's surrealistic story "Metamorphosis" of certain traits found in folklore.¹ Not only is the story steeped in symbolism, but it is specifically concerned with the metamorphosis of a human being into a lower form of life, an ancient and widely dispersed topic of myth. Then too, the threefold construction of Kafka's story, the thrice repeated appeal for pity, shows how similar the creative process in his mind was to that of the myth maker and balladist. But it is in the specific pattern of the narrative that the most striking similarity to folklore is to be found. Metamorphosis followed by a repeated appeal for love is one of the most wide-spread narrative patterns of myth and ballad, to be found in the "beauty and the beast" and the "loathly lady" tales. Usually in the folklore material the appeal for love, or the symbolic gesture of love, is granted and the magic transformation and marriage follow. With Kafka, however, the masochism that turned his writing into a kind of extended self-torture precluded any such happy solution.

In the search for similarities of psychological meaning it is the "beauty and the beast" tale that offers the more significant parallel. There the beast is masculine, and although Beauty may seem to occupy the center of the stage, being the active agent, the story is really the "beast's" story. The "loathly lady" stories, on the other hand, replete with complex totemism and possible references to lunar periodicity, seem to express a male reaction to women.² In primitive society, the "beauty and the beast" type of fable may possibly be totemistic in meaning also (*The Golden Bough*, iv, 125 ff.), but by the age of fairy tale and ballad, psychological themes had probably become predominant. They are apparent in the famous version recorded by Mme. Leprince de Beaumont, but will be found generally in Basque, Swiss, German, Italian, Portuguese, Magyar, Indian, Kaffir, and other ver-

¹ "Few modern writers have the power to forge myths capable of rousing in us the violent emotions which the myths of the ancient religions arouse. Kafka is such a writer." Claude-Edmonde Magny, "The Objective Depiction of Absurdity," *Quarterly Review of Literature*, II, 1945, 211.

² For an excellent summation of the meaning and origin of this theme in folklore see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Loathly Bride," *Speculum*, October, 1945, xx, 391-404.

sions. In the tale, it will be recalled, a prince, cast through an evil spell into the form of a hideous beast, appeals in the most humble fashion to a beautiful maiden for her love. When the maiden overcomes her repugnance and kisses the beast, the prince regains his human form and marries the girl.

In the tale certain themes are obvious. In the beauty's act of love there is the sentimental and moral concept of love, or rather tenderheartedness, overcoming repugnance; in the prince's marrying her is the commonplace theme of virtue being rewarded. The transformation following the girl's gesture of love expresses a third theme, partially symbolic—the power of love to conquer evil. Not so obvious in meaning are the evil metamorphosis itself and the strangely exaggerated and repeated appeal of the beast for Beauty's love. These latter are the most hauntingly mysterious parts of the tale and are therefore most likely to be the most deeply laden with autobiographical symbols.³ They are also the two phases of the narrative that are paralleled in Kafka's story. What makes this parallel especially interesting is the fact that the autobiographical meaning of the incidents in Kafka's story can be readily perceived, and thus a hypothesis is presented to elucidate the original autobiographical references in this familiar folklore narrative pattern.

About the general meaning of the metamorphosis in the Kafka story there appears to be no mystery. All our knowledge of Kafka's life and story technique suggests that it is a precipitation in fantasy of his lifelong sense of loneliness and exclusion,⁴ of physical inferiority,⁵ and of an ingrained hypochondria, references to which in his diaries are too numerous to enumerate. That the entire story is one long, varied and agonized appeal for love is obvious. It is the strangely fawning appeal of the "beast" magnified and elaborated until it absorbs the whole creative impulse. Three times the "black beetle"⁶ comes forth to make the symbolic revelation of repulsiveness and the humble appeal for love, and each time he is rewarded with cruelty, derision, or indifference, until finally, when even his kindly sister

³ They are also the most consistent. In "The Frog Prince," found in the Grimm brothers' collection, for example, the non-symbolic themes become utterly confused, for the appeal for love is responded to with an act of cruelty. Nevertheless, the magic transformation and marriage follow.

⁴ Max Brod, *Franz Kafka*, Schocken Books, New York, 1947, pp. 9, 95–96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11; also *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. by Max Brod, Schocken Books, New York, 1948, I, 60.

⁶ Kafka's own term. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, I, 304.

Greta deserts him, he resorts to the last desperate appeal of the narcissistic neurotic and dies for pity (rationalizing the act as a sacrifice to free his family from the burden of his presence).

The need for affection is the basic psychic hunger. In Kafka's case lack of consistent or reliable sources of affection in childhood seems to have established the narcissistic pattern⁷ in conjunction with a morbid sense of physical inferiority, the latter heightened by his complex relationship with his robust and energetic father. The story "Metamorphosis" is a symbolistic projection of this psychic pattern. It seems to say, "I am not loved because I am repulsive." In varying degrees the pattern is common to all humanity and so is likely to appear frequently in myth and folklore. What Kafka's neurosis will not permit him to express but the wisdom of the myth comprehends, is that the repulsiveness is really psychic in origin and love could achieve the "magic transformation."

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⁷ The importance of this pattern in psychoneurosis is discussed by Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*, W. W. Norton, 1945, p. 159. See also Edmund Bergler, *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, Doubleday, 1950, for the theory that all deeply symbolic writing is a defense mechanism involved in this neurosis.